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**Functionalist Approaches and Translation Strategies**

功能翻译理论与翻译策略

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## Synopsis

Translation studies both in China and the West has undergone two separate yet parallel roads of development, i.e. the debate of literal vs. free, or that of word vs. sense. Without exception, those involved in the earlier debate were themselves primarily translation practitioners of Bible (in China, the Buddhist Scriptures) and the great works of classical antiquity. They led the discussion of the principles and postulates mainly from the standpoint of explaining and justifying their own positions on translation methodologies. The divergent and various approaches put forward were primarily sporadic and spontaneous in nature, thus unable to explain in a systematic and consistent way the miscellaneous phenomena concerned with translation. As Eugene A. Nida puts it (2001:115), “in many instances, the differences about principles of translation only reflect changing fashions about literature, and in some cases heated arguments about how to translate seem to reflect little more than personal prejudices and literary rivalries.”

Translation never happens in a vacuum. It occurs in a factual situation of modern society. Against this background, the school of functionalism, also called *Skopostheorie* by Vermeer, emerges and provides a valuable insight into translation both as a *process* (translating) and a *result* (translation: the translated text as a historical fact).

*Skopostheorie* attempts to take into account as many as possible relevant facts and factors in the translating process and the translated product as well as their influence on translation in a communicative context and comes to the conclusion that the decisive factor in the final production of a particular translation is the

translation brief rather than the source text. Therefore, the translator should adopt a top-down approach in proceeding with a particular translation assignment; since text linguistics also specifies that a text be dealt with in a top-down way, the author here suggests that text linguistics' relevance to translation be incorporated into the functional approach to translation as its concrete form in the case of conventional translation assignments.

This thesis is made up of five chapters. The first chapter "*Translation and traditional translation studies*", is a brief view of some fundamental questions concerning translating and translation: a pragmatic analysis of the translating process; the various versions of the concept of equivalence; the correct attitudes to translation theory, *i.e.* translation theory is not supposed to be viewed as a cure-all for all translation problems, but rather as a general theoretical framework by which the translator can justify the specific translation strategies for certain translation problems; an overview of the traditional approaches to translation both in the West and China prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the inherent problems underlying them, which will inevitably points to the emergence of a functional approach in the following chapters.

Chapter Two elaborates in detail the basic concepts of the functionalist approaches to translation in contemporary Germany with a few selective illustrations taken from real-life situations to show the relative advantage which functionalism enjoys over the traditional approaches: it is all-embracing theoretical power to account for both conventional and unconventional translation types.

Chapter Three aims to account for the link between translation theory and text linguistics and outlines some major contributions made by text linguistics and

functional linguistics to functionalism of translation studies and also suggest some tentative approaches for a translator in face of a specific SLT or translation assignment.

Chapter Four attempts to demonstrate the objective presence of functionalism by outlining the similar viewpoints shared by a variety of schools of translation studies as well as their representative figures. The similar voices uttered by both translation theorists and practitioners with rich experience in either literary or scientific translation assignments will further prove the feasibility and applicability of functionalist approach.

Chapter Five summarizes the main aspects of functionalist translation approach, clarifies the relationship between the functional approach and specific translation strategies for a specific translation assignment, and suggests two major applications of the functional approach to translation: as a general theoretical framework and as an aid to translator training.

Key words: *Skopostheorie*; Functionalism; Translation Strategies

## 摘 要

历史上，中西方翻译研究都经过了两条单独但又平行的发展道路，即关于直译与意译之争。无一例外地，卷入这场论争的大部分都是圣经（在中国是佛经）和文学翻译家。他们发起这场翻译原则和理论论争的起点主要着眼于阐述和论证各自的翻译方法。他们所提出的各式各样的原则和方法本质上都是散乱自发的，因而不能系统一致地阐释翻译过程中纷繁复杂的现象。正如奈达所言：“在许多的情况下，各种翻译原则的差异只是反映了文学上的一些变迁。有时，关于翻译方法的一些激烈争论反映的似乎只是个人的偏见和文学流派的对立。”

翻译从来就不是在真空中完成的，而是发生在当代社会的现实情况中。以此为背景，功能主义流派（或称作目的论）的出现，对翻译过程和翻译作品提供了宝贵的见解。目的论考查了翻译过程和翻译作品中的种种因素以及他们对在具体的交际环境中译文的最终形成所产生的影响，认为对译文最终形成起决定性作用的因素是翻译要求(translation brief)，而非原语文本，因此翻译过程中应采用自上而下的方式；同时具体的语篇翻译也应采取这一方式，基于这一共同点，作者提出语篇翻译理论可以作为目的论在常规翻译情况下的具体体现形式。

本文由五个章节组成。第一章为“翻译与传统的翻译研究”。本章对有关翻译过程和翻译作品的几个基本问题进行了简要回顾：对翻译过程的实际分析；关于翻译对等概念的几种看法；对翻译理论本身的正确态度，即翻译理论不应该被看成所有实际翻译问题的万能良药，而应该是能够在这一理论

框架内，译者能够对自己遇到的翻译问题所采取的翻译策略进行辩护与阐释；对 19 世纪以前的中西方传统译论及所蕴涵的问题的简要回顾，这一部分的与后文所出现的功能翻译理论构成了承前启后的关系。

第二章详细论述了当代德国功能派翻译理论的基本观点，并附有实际生活情景中的几个翻译实例来说明功能翻译理论相对于传统翻译理论所具有的优势，即能够阐释实际生活中的各种常规和非常规翻译类型。

第三章试图阐释翻译理论与语篇语言学的关系，并概述了语篇语言学和功能语言学对功能翻译理论所作出的一些主要贡献，也对译者面对一具体的原语语篇或翻译任务所应采取的策略提出了一些尝试性的建议。

第四章试图通过概括几家具有代表性的翻译流派及其代表人物所具有的相似性的观点来揭示功能主义的客观存在。翻译理论家及具有丰富实际文学翻译和科技翻译经验的共同观点将进一步证明功能翻译理论的切实可行性。

第五章扼要概述了功能派翻译理论的主要方面，阐明了功能理论与具体翻译实践中所采取的翻译策略之间的关系，并且提出了功能翻译理论对翻译实践的两大贡献：对具体翻译策略的阐释功能和培训译员的实际指导作用。

关键词：目的论；功能主义；翻译策略

## **Abbreviations**

**SL: source language**

**TL: target language**

**SLT: source language text**

**TLT: target language text**

**MT: machine translation**

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## Chapter One Translation and Traditional Translation Studies

The act of translating is generally recognized as a complex yet fascinating process which has vexed linguists, psychologists, ethnologists, and anthropologists from time immemorial, hence the numerous definitions of translations from different perspectives. Take three of them for example. Catford defines translation as “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)” (Catford, 1965: 20). Nida’s definition runs to the effect that “translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message” (Nida and Taber, 1969:12). Another renowned translation theorist Peter Newmark defines translating as “a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language” (Peter Newmark, 1981:7). Some even go further and incorporate intralingual communications (for example, writing ancient classics into modern literature for contemporary readership) into the study of translation.

A brief view will reveal the divergent and at times even conflicting opinions surrounding the translating process. For the sake of analysis, we shall adopt Newmark’s definition, *i.e.* the written form of translation will be our primary concern in this paper. Aside from the definition of the translating process, there are the further questions of “what is a translator?” and “what is translation theory?”. We shall soon find that the two questions are similarly fraught with ambiguity and the answers to them, not surprisingly, are far from satisfactory.

## 1.1 What Is Translating?

Nida (1986:60) claims that “translating means translating meaning”. Ironically, *meaning* is a term which in itself gives rise to multiple definitions. According to Nida, meaning exists in any and every level of language, i.e. phonological, morphological, lexical, syntactic and textual. Therefore, a translator’s task is to reproduce in request to specific translation assignments the meaning of the SLT in the TLT in the target language-culture which may be similar to or even radically different from the source language-culture.

Superficially, translating sometimes seems so easy a job that everyone with a bilingual background can translate or interpret. The truth is far from the case once s/he embarks on the actual process. Translating or interpreting is never the simple task of matching the words or lexemes in one language with their corresponding one or the so-called equivalents in another language. If so, foreign language learning would cease to be a laborious undertaking for millions and even billions of language students, and a large enough dictionary or encyclopedia would suffice to take the place of numerous translator training institutions and teachers. Actually, the practice of translating involves much more than it seems, as will be discussed in detail in the subsequent chapters. I.A. Richards (1953) has claimed that it is probably the most complex type of event in the history of the cosmos.

Much of the controversy about translating stems from the nature of language. As is widely acknowledged in the circle of linguistics, language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication, or in Saussure’s dichotomy, the signifier and signified. By *arbitrary* is meant the symbolic relationship between the explicit linguistic sign and the concrete physical entity

in the world of experience. What should be borne in mind is that our study is primarily concerned with translating with two languages and cultures in constant interaction. Therefore, translating and translation embody a great many factors, both linguistic and extralinguistic. Besides, the translating process is not a uni-directional procedure, but rather a two-directional one involving the author, the source text, the translator, the target text, and even the anticipated readership of the original and the translation.

Special mention should be made of the relevant facts and factors that play an important role in the production of the source language text (SLT) and the target language text (TLT) in that they will be relevant to our present study. Following a linguistic line, we shall classify them into linguistic and extralinguistic context as indicated in the above passage. Linguistic context is here defined as the constraints on the translator exercised by the textual elements of the SLT. In a similar vein, extralinguistic context is defined as those facts and factors in the world of experience that directly or indirectly influence the translator's decision-making in the process of translating such as the format of the translation, the date of submission, way of payment, and even the expected response of the TLT readership. It is in turn subdivided into the context of situation and the context of culture. Of course, by this dichotomy is by no means meant a rigid dividing line since there is bound to be some blurred edges or overlapping areas.

## **1.2 The Concept of Equivalence**

The concept of equivalence is a fundamental issue to translation studies for over two millenniums and so is it in modern Western translation theories. The concept of equivalence is closely related to the emergence and development of modern linguistics, though its rudimentary form can be traced much long ago.

Modern linguistically oriented translation theorists reject traditional translation theory, like that of Cicero, Horace, S. Jerome, down to Alexander Tytler, Theodore Savory outright as prescientific, “subjective”, and even naïve. However, it remains an indisputable fact that traditional translation theory contains within it a great many valuable insights although the theorists tend to make global observations on translation in general, but in effect only means one, and often narrow area, of it. The tendency to generalize is at present still characteristic of the modern linguistically oriented translation theories and is considered in this study as detrimental to the development of translation theory.

The earlier linguistic translation theorists generally assume that for each and every lexical item or linguistic unit in the source language, there is always a corresponding one in the receptor language. The translator’s task, therefore, is to find the linguistic equivalent of the source language’s translation unit, as can be readily recognized in the definition of translating by Catford quoted above. Actually, Catford even maintains:

*The central problem of translation practice is that of finding TL translation equivalent. A central task of translating is that of defining the nature and conditions of translation equivalence. (1965:21)*

A similar voice echoing that of Catford is heard even in the work of Nida and Taber, one of whom, Nida, possesses rich experience in Bible translating:

*Translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. (1969:12).*

As its extreme pole, an optimistic view about the feasibility of machine translation (MT) is heard from Oettinger’s definition of translation:

*Translating may be defined as the process of transforming signs or representations into other signs or representations. If the originals have some significance, we generally require that their images also have the same significance, or, more realistically, as nearly the same significance as we can get. Keeping significance invariant is the central problem in translating between natural language.* (Oettinger, 1960:14)

The reason for the rise of such basically linguistic viewpoints on equivalence is due in large part to the emergence of linguistics in the 1950s and 1960s. Linguistics, then represented by the theory of Noam Chomsky's syntax and transformational generative grammar, was the dominant humanistic discipline. Linguists adopted views and methods of natural sciences, in particular mathematics and formal logic in their research of language, and hence by its natural corollary, translation studies; this is still a practice much in fashion up to now. Some even have gone so far as to lead to felicitous coinage of the term *translatology* (c.f.E.A.Nida, 1964).

Of course, such over-optimistic views have a great deal to do with the recognition of translation studies as an independent discipline in its own right during this period, which was once relegated to the status of being merely part of foreign language learning process. Empirical research has repeatedly borne out that such methods in translation studies have led to a dead end.

A question arises as to at what level or to what extent the source text and its translation(s) are considered to be equivalent. This clearly requires an elucidation and definition of the so-called *translation unit* and the term *equivalence*. Opinions are divided as to what is to be equivalent, whether words or segments of words or even bigger units beyond the sentence. However, translation unit was

generally understood as a cohesive element lying between the level of word and sentence or even at the level of text. Naturally, equivalence was supposed to be established between translation units of the SLT and the TLT. Nevertheless, translation unit was in itself a term of controversy for different translation theorists, ranging from word, phrase, sentence, orthographic paragraph, all the way to text.

Another closely related category is the term *equivalence* itself. Realizing the inherent limitations of equivalence in the sense of word-for-word transfer, some equivalence-minded translation theorists attempted to define equivalence in terms of stratification or hierarchy. Koller defined equivalence as existing at five different levels, namely, *denotative equivalence*, *connotative equivalence*, *text-normative equivalence*, *pragmatic equivalence*, and lastly, *formal equivalence*. For sake of space, we do not intend to go into details of each category.

Moreover, another translation theorist Nida distinguishes in his *From One Language to Another* between *formal correspondence* and *dynamic equivalence* (later renamed as *functional equivalence*). His classifications are mainly from a communicative perspective. By the dichotomy of formal correspondence and dynamic equivalence, Nida does not intend to draw a rigid dividing line between form and meaning. In other words, his functional equivalence is not supposed to be understood in the sense of meaning or free equivalence. It is his belief that all the forms of linguistic signs carry meaning, an opinion having much in common with the present-day functional linguistics, which is much in vogue today. Let Nida speak for himself:

*“To describe the difficulties of faithful translating merely in terms of the tension*



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